

**Cathryn Creno**

[The Arizona Republic](#)

While the Gila River Indian Community still formally opposes the planned South Mountain Freeway, this week it took the unprecedented step of opening the door to a state study of a freeway corridor on tribal land.

Gila River Gov. William Rhodes sent a letter Wednesday to Arizona Department of Transportation Director John Halikowski offering to allow the state to study the possibility of building the planned extension of Loop 202 on the reservation. He also offered the tribe's assistance with the study.

"Despite our desire for a no-build option, we recognize there is a high likelihood that the Loop 202 South Mountain will be built," Rhodes said. "Therefore it is in our best interest to explore all options to mitigate any negative impacts to our culture and land; including a potential on-reservation alignment."

ADOT spokesman Tim Tait had said Thursday that if the state were invited to conduct a study on tribal land, it would be unprecedented and a major breakthrough in negotiations to move the planned extension of Loop 202 from the southernmost part of Phoenix onto the reservation. "We have never been allowed onto the Gila River to do a study," he said.

The tribe's announcement came at the same time that ADOT took heat from members of its South Mountain Citizens Advisory Team for not working harder to reach an agreement with the tribe. The team is made up of representatives from community and business groups. The team is expected to make a non-binding recommendation on whether to build the South Mountain Freeway by fall.

"It seems like ADOT and the tribe are always talking about meeting, but never getting around to it," Carola Tamarkin, who represents the Ahwatukee Foothills Chamber of Commerce on the 25-member freeway advisory team, said at the team's meeting Thursday night. "Nothing is happening."

If Thursday's meeting is any indication of how the advisory team vote will go, ADOT has a tough sell. Members raised concerns about air pollution, noise, trucks carrying hazardous materials, drainage, traffic volume and the height of the planned freeway.

In December, after a meeting with high-level officials, including two members of Congress, Gila River officials agreed to invite ADOT to submit a proposal for building the 202 extension on its land. In the view of ADOT officials, the letter seals the practical part of that agreement.

U.S. Rep. Harry Mitchell, a Democrat from Tempe who attended the December meeting, praised the tribe's willingness to work with ADOT. "If it turns out the highway can be built less expensively and in a way that would benefit all the surrounding communities, that would be a win for everyone: the Gila River Indian Community, Ahwatukee and the entire metro area," he said. "As a member of the (House) Transportation Committee, I am eager to help."

On Thursday, Gila River Lt. Gov. Joseph Manuel and other tribal officials told *The Arizona Republic* Editorial Board in a meeting that freeway foes should not be overly optimistic that the tribe will agree to the freeway. "Our preference is still 'no build,'" said Gila River spokeswoman Alia Maisonet. She pointed out that like residents of Ahwatukee, many tribal members believe the freeway would create too much noise, air pollution, disrupt wildlife habitats and spoil Gila River's serene, rural lifestyle.

Maisonet said advantages to having the freeway would be increased traffic to the Gila River's Vee Quiva Casino near Laveen and reduced truck traffic through some residential sections of the reservation. "But we look seven generations into the future when we make decisions involving our land," she said.

Tait and officials from the Maricopa Association of Governments on Thursday said they intend to continue with plans for the South Mountain Freeway along the Pecos Road corridor, funded by MAG last summer.

ADOT is completing an environmental impact study of the freeway corridor. Public hearings on

the South Mountain Freeway are expected to start in the fall, Tait said.